

## **An Independent Ethics Commission IS STILL Needed!**

*By Jim Condos, Vermont's Secretary of State*

The Vermont Constitution (Chapter 1, Article 6) demands that our elected officials are open, transparent, and accountable. The authors understood how transparency in government is the very basis of trust. State statute also demands access and accountability:

*It is the policy of this subchapter to provide for free and open examination of records consistent with Chapter I, Article 6 of the Vermont Constitution. Officers of government are trustees and servants of the people and it is in the public interest to enable any person to review and criticize their decisions even though such examination may cause inconvenience or embarrassment. (1 V.S.A. § 315)*

The overwhelming majority of our dedicated local and state public officials are trustworthy, hard-working individuals striving to better the lives of those they serve. They are people who give generously of their time and want to do the right thing.

However, corruption can exist, and seemingly innocent conflicts of interest pop up everywhere in a small state like Vermont. These issues, even in small doses, can be just as corrosive to our democracy as more prominent scandals, undermining the public trust.

The key to our democracy is the public's access to open and transparent government. This sacred trust must not be taken lightly. We must restore and improve that accountability or risk Vermonters' faith in our ability to govern.

Vermont remains one of only a handful of states without an Ethics Commission. The 2015 Center for Public Integrity ranking of the states had Vermont with an overall grade of D-. Essentially, this ranking exists because we do not have an independent ethics commission or the required financial disclosures existing in nearly every other state.

Vermont can and must do better!

The time has come for Vermont to enact a clear ethics law with a code of ethics and financial disclosure for our elected officials.

The time has come for Vermont to create an independent ethics commission to provide education and insight, addressing ethical issues across the Legislative, Executive, and Municipal sections of government.

I am encouraged by the Legislature's growing enthusiasm around the issue, as well as the Governor's supportive statements during his campaign. I am hopeful this will translate into meaningful ethics reform.

To be effective, a commission must be independent, adequately resourced, and empowered to fairly and impartially field and investigate complaints from the public.

Yes - this will require a budget and a small staff, but these investments will be a small price to pay for a more accountable government and a place where affected Vermonters can seek redress and where unsure government officials can seek advice.

Establishing an ethics committee will not suddenly provide government with a moral compass. However, it will be a step in the right direction and by shining a brighter light on improved transparency and accountability.